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## BETWEEN THE UMBRELLA AND THE ELEPHANT: ELECTIONS, ETHNIC NEGOTIATIONS AND THE POLITICS OF SPIRIT POSSESSION IN TESHI, ACCRA

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# BETWEEN THE UMBRELLA AND THE ELEPHANT: ELECTIONS, ETHNIC NEGOTIATIONS AND THE POLITICS OF SPIRIT POSSESSION IN TESHI, ACCRA

*Meera Venkatachalam*

The town of Teshi, widely regarded as a suburb of the Ghanaian capital Accra, is home to a number of Ga spirit mediums who believe they host spirits from regions north of their traditional Ga homeland, such as Ashanti,<sup>1</sup> and the savanna belt populated by the Dagomba, Gonja, Mossi, Hausa and other peoples. These instances of cross-regional possession, which address the strangeness of all things northern, with aspects of the exotic cultures recreated, admired and shunned simultaneously, may be read within the context of the relationships and contacts maintained by the Ga with these peoples in the past. The present article demonstrates how Ga spirit mediums in Teshi, and their non-Ga northern spirits, drew upon conceptions of ethnic contact – as understood against the backdrop of their cross-cultural possession and ritual practices – to produce commentaries on contemporary political issues and ethnic tensions that have arisen recently within the parameters of the modern Ghanaian state.

The phenomenon of cross-regional possession, noted in Teshi, has parallels in other African societies, where histories of ethnic contact and/or conflict are reflected in the spirit pantheon of a particular people (Kramer 1993; Boddy 1994; Stoller 1995; Lambek 1996; Giles 2000; McIntosh 2004). Kramer (1993) suggests that in several African societies spirit possessions function as mimetic ethnographies (Taussig 1993) and are elaborate introspective discourses on cross-cultural and cross-regional interactions. By the eighteenth century, the Ga homeland – the geographical area in and around the Accra plains of southern Ghana – constituted a loose confederacy of autonomous city states tied to the Asante kingdom – the dominant regional power – by treaties and alliances (Parker 2000). Like many of the peoples subjected to Asante political and cultural hegemony in the sub-region, the Ga gradually incorporated aspects of Asante culture into their own society. Ga contact with peoples of the savanna (north of Asante and the Akan forest belt) was by contrast indirect. During the Ga possession performances under discussion, aspects of alien cultures are adopted, exaggerated, and over-dramatized: the act of exaggeration highlights the strangeness of the Other, thereby creating degrees of distance between the host culture and the alien one, the latter having been brought into the host arena by the spirit interlocutors.

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<sup>1</sup>‘Ashanti’ is here used for people from the modern Ashanti Region of Ghana: ‘Asante’ refers to the erstwhile Asante kingdom and Akan inhabitants.

The perceived ritual and cultural divisions between coastal southern societies and those of the north, expressed through spirit possession in Ga areas, manifest themselves through similar practices amongst neighbouring peoples: these incidences, however, provide an interesting contrast to the Ga spirit mediums' engagement with national politics. East of Ga territory, southern Eweland (Ghana and Togo) and Mina country (Togo) demonstrate a corpus of possession cults which have been read as an embodiment of the southern Ewe and Mina history of interregional contact with a medley of northern peoples, such as the Ashanti, Gonja, Dagomba, Hausa, Kabye, Losso and Tchamba.<sup>2</sup> While the Ga spirit mediums and their northern spirits address the post-colonial politics of ethnicity through explicit verbal discourse, cross-cultural possession amongst the Ewe and Mina critiques similar issues in a subtler, more implicit fashion through the act of possession itself. Between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries, Ewe and Mina merchants frequented the markets at the interface of the savanna and forest belts to purchase people for domestic slavery and also for sale into the trans-Atlantic trading system. In contemporary Ewe and Mina areas, cults known as *Gorovodu*<sup>3</sup> and *Atikevodu*<sup>4</sup> serve as a platform for engaging with aspects of the slave-holding past. Initiates believe they are possessed by the spirits of the northern peoples that they once enslaved and eventually assimilated through marriage. As is the case with Ga spirit mediums hosting northern spirits, Ewe *Gorovodu* and *atikevodu* initiates speak a 'glossolalia full of northern sounds' (Rosenthal 2002: 318) when possessed. They also dress in northern attire, and appropriate northern objects for ritual use, to emphasize the northern-ness of these spirits. Rosenthal (2002: 316) argues that, apart from cementing the apparent otherness of the north, the Ewe and Mina engagement with these cults is a method of reshuffling power relationships once internal to southern communities. Possession facilitates the inversion of the historical master-slave power relationship, as it enables northern slave spirits to control the bodies of the descendants of their southern masters. In the context of modern Togo, cross-regional trance with its 'ethics of radical reciprocity' takes on a 'political irony' (*ibid.*: 316): government has been dominated for over four decades by northern peoples – in particular the Kabye – who regard the southern Ewe and Mina with suspicion, since they are associated with the political opposition. Through these possession cults, the Ewe and Mina attempt to examine their agency *vis-à-vis* the enslavement and oppression of northern peoples in the past: paradoxically, they are oppressed – in contemporary Togo – by the very northerners that they revere through these practices. Rosenthal suggests that these cults are 'vehicles of cultural resistance to the abuses of state power in Togo'. Ritual, she argues, makes identities and hierarchies fluid, and in the 'context of oppression, this fact in and of itself makes ritual politically active' (*ibid.*: 316). Rosenthal reads *Gorovodu* and *Atikevodu* spirit possession as resistance to a state discourse that emphasizes

<sup>2</sup>See Rosenthal's (1997) study of possession cults amongst the Dogbede Ewe of southern Togo; Wendl (1999) on the Mina of southern Togo; and Venkatachalam (2007) on the Anlo-Ewe of south-eastern Ghana.

<sup>3</sup>*Goro* in Twi, Ga and Ewe means kola nut: a gentle stimulant used widely in the northern savanna. *Vodu* in Ewe means religion. *Gorovodu* means religion of the peoples of the kola.

<sup>4</sup>*Atike* in Ewe means medicine, deities believed to have medicinal powers.

difference between northern and southern peoples. This resistance is, according to her, implicit and even unintentional, intrinsic to the very nature of Ewe and Mina spirit possession, as during trance the divisions between north and south are momentarily erased when northern spirits fuse with southern hosts.

The interpretation of 'vodu ritual as resistance' against a backdrop of ethnic politics (Rosenthal 2002: 316) presents Ewe and Mina spirit hosts as agents who unconsciously reproduce elements of a historical discourse on power relations that is embedded in cultic practices. Rather than treat ritual as political on account of its very 'nature and being' (Rosenthal 2002: 316), I seek to document how Ga spirit mediums and their northern spirits, through possession, have forged their own political commentary on recent national events. While spirit possession is related to the history of Ga contact with peoples to their north, this history is far from complete. Two factors are particularly significant in relationships that continue to evolve. First, the north is no longer as distant as it was: cross-regional flows of people have intensified since the 1950s, with migration to Accra and Tema bringing once-distant northerners into closer contact with the coastal Ga. Second, modern party politics – in particular Ghana's two-party system – has begun to influence Ga perceptions of the peoples located to their geographical north. Ghanaian party politics have come to exhibit an ethnic fault line that strongly influences political sympathies (Nugent 1999). Local readings of contemporary politics have developed in Teshi that derive in part from a locally construed history of contact with northern peoples embedded in practices such as spirit possession. The juxtaposition of divisions made between the north and south in the ritual sphere with the ethno-political map of modern Ghana has led the Ga to read ethnic alliances and loyalties associated with party politics in a manner at odds with reality. The present article seeks to examine how, at a local level in Teshi, juxtaposing the ritual and political divides affects perception of the national ethno-political fault line. A local reading of ethno-political history resulted in the emergence of a new set of spirit possession performances in Teshi in 2004, providing a series of commentaries on ethnic relations and national politics in contemporary Ghana.

### CROSS-REGIONAL RITUAL FLOWS: SOME BACKGROUND

The existence of geographically distant northern spirits on the Ga coastal littoral can be explained by the movement, at the turn of the twentieth century, of ritual resources south from the savanna. The appeal of these resources was due to a time-honoured perception that the savanna was a ritual treasure trove of magical medicines, potent deities and, in particular, anti-witchcraft remedies. By the early twentieth century, witchcraft – often associated with a loss of fertility and money – was perceived as a proliferating social evil, at first in the Akan forest belt and then in other societies of the Gold Coast Colony. This growing perception has been explained in terms of rapid integration into the colonial economy (Field 1960) and as a 'neurotic reaction' (Debrunner 1959: 61) to the rapid socio-economic changes of that period as cash cropping and the cocoa boom created new channels for the accumulation of wealth, allowing a new section of society to access the colonial economy. Hitherto, such people had been denied opportunities for wealth creation, and their enrichment produced new socio-economic elites,

which generated a certain degree of bewilderment and resentment in wider society. Envy was believed to nurture witchcraft, and the new wealthy elites lived in perpetual fear of becoming victims of the phenomenon should their less prosperous competitors choose to deploy it against them. The savanna belt (known as *Sarem* in Twi) was not integrated into the colonial economy as fully, and did not witness the radical transformations associated with the forest and coastal belts (Kramer 1993). Consequently the Akan of the forest belt perceived the peoples of the *Sarem* (such as the Tallensi, Gonja and Dagomba) as free of the ravages of witchcraft, which further gave rise to the view that their deities had preventative effects. Certain individuals went to great lengths to acquire such successful measures for combating witchcraft, and made frequent pilgrimages to the *Sarem* to visit ritual practitioners. They would then establish satellite shrines in the Akan forest belt: a phenomenon well documented in the historical literature.<sup>5</sup> From the forest belt, these ritual techniques and deities moved towards the coastal Ewe and Ga, but were slotted into their religious systems in a different way: they came to be associated with spirit possession.

The Ga spirits resemble the deities represented in the *Gorovodu* and *Atikevodu* pantheon of the Ewe and Mina, since these ritual techniques, spirits and deities were part of the same north–south ritual flow of the 1920s. Amongst the Ewe and Mina, these techniques developed into well-organized cultic networks, concerned with the moral consequences of enslaving northern peoples in the past (Rosenthal 1997), with memberships sometimes transmitted through kinship structures (Venkatachalam 2007). In Ga areas, however, spirit mediums functioned – and continue to function – as individual, independent religious entrepreneurs who set themselves up as ritual practitioners and then transmit this knowledge to disciples who have decided to serve similar spirits. The term ‘north’ when used in previous academic literature<sup>6</sup> strictly refers to the *Sarem* or savanna belt, but, from the Ga perspective, the north refers also to Asante and the broader Akan forest belt. Some of the spirits that the Ga describe as ‘northern’ are believed to originate from the Akan forest belt and not the far north, suggesting that the Ga have conflated all peoples to their geographical north in the ritual sphere.

### SPIRIT MEDIUMS OF TESHI

Located midway between Accra and the port city of Tema, Teshi is home to almost 70,000 people,<sup>7</sup> and has drawn high in-migration during the last century, attracting people from other parts of Ghana and neighbouring countries. Teshi is no longer predominantly Ga but ethnically mixed, with the addition of Ewe,

<sup>5</sup>The northern spirits of Teshi resemble Ewe versions of these deities, albeit superficially (Rosenthal 1997; Allman and Parker 2005; Venkatachalam 2007).

<sup>6</sup>Rosenthal (1997) and Venkatachalam (2007) note that the ‘north’ when used by coastal peoples within the context of possession cults encompasses the Akan forest belt and ritual exports from there.

<sup>7</sup>A UN estimate of Teshi’s population is 70,000 approximately. <<http://www.irinnews.org/report.aspx?reportid=48748>>, accessed 10 December 2009.

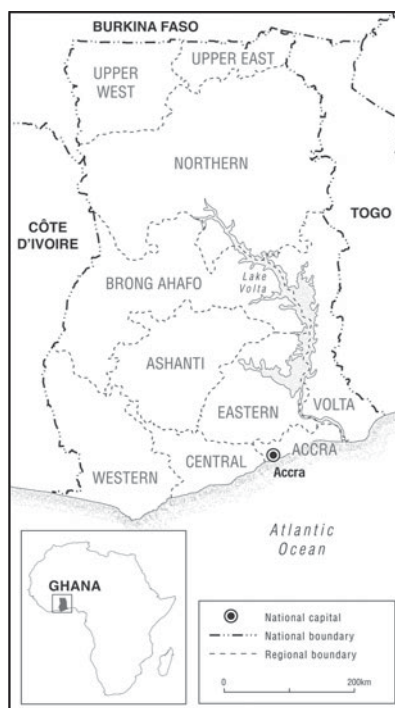


FIGURE 1 The Ga and their neighbours      FIGURE 2 The regions of modern Ghana

Fanti, Ashanti and several peoples of the northern savanna.<sup>8</sup> The Accra–Tema Beach Road, constructed parallel to the coast, divides many of Teshi's large neighbourhoods such as Lascala and Aduem, while another section known as Tsue-Bleo lies to its north. An area simply known as 'Teshi Village' lies south of Beach Road, by the sea. The Ga, Akan, Ewe and Fanti are evenly distributed, but migrants from the north of Ghana are concentrated in a *zongo*<sup>9</sup> located near Tsue-Bleo. The social extremes of Ghanaian society are also found: two sets of residential complexes – 'estates'<sup>10</sup> in Ghanaian parlance – are located in eastern Teshi, housing professionals engaged in lucrative occupations. In the overcrowded neighbourhoods of Teshi most people are involved in petty trade and poorly paid occupations: men tend to be labourers, drivers and security guards, while women are often engaged in retail, run eateries, or are either hairdressers or

<sup>8</sup>The latter are often referred to as 'Hausa' or 'Frafra', generic terms in southern Ghana to describe anyone from the Northern, Upper East and Upper West regions, and the savanna belt in general: included are the Dagomba and Gonja of Ghana, the Hausa of Nigeria, the Fulani, and peoples of southern Burkina Faso. (The Frafra are also a particular ethnic group, a subset of the Gurunsi.)

<sup>9</sup>*Zongo*: 'strangers' quarters', areas in southern towns where Muslims are in the majority.

<sup>10</sup>The Teshie-Nungua and First Junction estates.



seamstresses. The standard of living for most of Teshi's residents (apart from those in the estates) was notoriously low in 2003–4 – the average daily earning per household a mere ₵30,000.<sup>11</sup>

Teshi's religious landscape is representative of urban Ghana, consisting of a mixture of mainline and Pentecostal churches, and practitioners of 'traditional' religion. Historically, the Ga traditional religious system was a dynamic one, reflecting the creative ingenuity of the Ga coupled with the frequent cross-cultural contact between them and neighbouring peoples. As early as the 1920s, government sociologist M. J. Field identified four main 'types of worship' in and around Accra: *Kpele* was a mixture of migrant Ga and local deities, while *Me*, *Otu* and *Akon* were of Dangme, Fante and Akan origin respectively (Field 1937). In pre-colonial times, religious authority was the preserve of the *wulomei* (sing. *wulomo*), priests of the traditional tutelary deities (Ga *jemawonji*, sing. *jemawon*), such as Nai, the god of the Sea, and Sakumo and Koole, both lagoon deities. Usually, every *jemawon* had attached to it several *woyei* (sing. *woyo*), spirit mediums – usually women – who hosted the deity when possessed. These *woyei* were subordinate to the *wulomei* – generally men – of the *jemawon* in question. When possessed, the *woyo* spoke with greater authority, as it was believed that the *jemawon* was speaking through her.

In early twentieth-century Accra the spiritual monopoly of the *wulomei* came to be challenged by these *woyei*, who now emerged as key freelance ritual specialists. Many abandoned their traditional role as advocates of the *wulomei*, instead adopting and worshipping a number of lesser *jemawonji*, some of which were believed to originate from the northern savanna via the Akan forest belt. Most of these *jemawonji* were introduced into the local pantheon during the first two decades of the twentieth century as part of the north–south flow of ritual resources discussed above. The *woyei* came to organize their followers into what Field described as *agbamei*, cultic structures which did not resemble the larger civic cults of Accra (Field 1937). The rise of the *woyei* has been read against a certain backdrop: the assertion of economic independence on the part of women, and battles for the control of religious public spaces between representatives of the traditional civic cults, practitioners of 'new cults', and Christian clergy (Parker 2000). In contemporary Teshi, however, *woyei* can be either men or women, marking a sharp shift from the state of affairs in the early twentieth century, when these roles were usually exclusively associated with women (Field 1937; Parker 2000: 178–85), an indication that the gender dynamics associated with such practices are in constant flux.

Lascala, Aduem, Tsue-Bleo and Teshi Village are home to eight *woyei* or spirit mediums that feature in this article. Colloquially known as 'fetish priests',<sup>12</sup> they host spirits that originated from areas to the north. These mediums were favourably positioned in the neighbourhood: revered for their ability to host exotic foreign spirits, they were believed capable of offering protection and doing

<sup>11</sup> 1 GBP = 15,000 Ghanaian *cedis* (¢) GHC in mid-2003. Re-denomination resulted in the new 'third cedi' after 2007, coded GHS. In 2003, the minimum daily wage was ₵9,200. See <<http://www.globalintegrity.org/reports/2004/2004/country70b2.html?cc=gh&act=notebook>>, accessed 10 December 2008.

<sup>12</sup> 'Fetish priest' is used throughout West Africa for a practitioner of 'traditional' religion.



harm in equal measure. Frequently consulted by individuals for solutions to day-to-day existential issues, they provided a vast repertoire of services including protection against witchcraft in the form of treated charms and amulets; casting debilitating spells against individuals; advice on family, inheritance and relationship disputes; and enabling people to attain wealth. Their clientele was drawn mainly from Teshi, and typically from the lower strata of the socio-economic spectrum – people in poorly paid employment. Financially, the spirit mediums were not well-off and supplemented clients' payments through other activities, such as retailing. An ongoing quest to enhance their credentials led to rampant competition: they often tried to woo each other's clients and were eager to discover new strategies to respond to the needs of customers.

A well-known spirit medium, Afram, resided in a small dwelling by the sea in Teshi Village. Named after the spirit she worshipped, Afram was a popular ritual practitioner well into her sixties in 2003 who had lived in Teshi Village for most of her life, apart from brief spells in the northern Volta region and Afram plains that were part of the development of her career as a ritual specialist. Afram believed that when possessed she hosted a river spirit that originated in a Twi-speaking village in the Afram plains.<sup>13</sup> An elaborately decorated shrine dominated her small living quarters. Afram communed with the deity on a daily basis, usually in the presence of clients. When possessed, the spirit 'Afram' spoke through her, delivering advice to clients in a mixture of Twi and Ga.

A very popular ritual practitioner in neighbouring Aduem was known as Anaa. Though of Anlo-Ewe extraction, Anaa was born and raised in Teshi. He maintained a large shrine in his residence devoted to a cluster of Ewe *Gorovodu* deities, which included representations of Kunde and Abrewa, well-known anti-witchcraft deities of the Ashanti, Anlo-Ewe and Ga; Mama Tchamba, a slave spirit from northern Togo; and Brekete and Tongo, deities of the Anlo-Ewe, which were concealed in bags hanging from the ceiling.<sup>14</sup> People who felt their financial security was under threat from competing family members frequently consulted the spirits Anaa hosted.

Mossi Donkor<sup>15</sup> was a spirit medium who hosted a spirit by the same name, believed to be from Mossiland (in Burkina Faso). The spirit usually spoke in a mixture of Moré, Dagbani and Twi when it surfaced. When hosting the spirit, she assumed the form of a masculine northern Islamized trader, wearing colourful fez-like headgear and a flowing *batakari*.<sup>16</sup> Mossi's shrine consisted of a number of deities such as Tigare and Brekete, better known in the literature as anti-witchcraft movements that swept through the then Gold Coast in the first two decades of the twentieth century (Parker 2004; Allman and Parker 2005; Venkatachalam 2007). In close proximity to Mossi lived Tomoga, a practitioner associated with an Ashanti spirit. Both women were popular not just in their neighbourhood of Tsue-Bleo, but throughout Teshi.

Four other spirit mediums – Hausa, Fulani, Alla and Tigare – lived between Tsue-Bleo and Aduem. Hausa, a young man, had become a spirit host (to a

<sup>13</sup>The River Afram lies on the northern escarpment of Lake Volta.

<sup>14</sup>For a description of *Gorovodu* deities, see Rosenthal (1997).

<sup>15</sup>Mossi refers to an ethnic group, while Donkor is derived from *odonko*, Twi for slave.

<sup>16</sup>Tunic worn by Islamized peoples of the savanna.

Hausa spirit) as recently as 2003. He always wore a netted white cap, which resembled that of a northern Muslim. Fulani, a middle-aged man, hosted a northern spirit, which dispensed advice in Fulbe during consultations.<sup>17</sup> Alla was a young man who was possessed by a female spirit, believed to be associated with the Islamized peoples of the north: his most prized possession was a magical Qur'an specially treated by a Muslim *mallam* (the Hausa word for an Islamic scholar) who frequently visited the neighbourhood. Tigare, a middle-aged woman, was another well-established practitioner, believed to have expertise in anti-witchcraft spells; she spoke Ashanti Twi when possessed.

All the above individuals had become spirit mediums after experiencing some affliction and a recovery attributed to the spirit with which they had come to be associated. They claimed to have consolidated their ritual expertise from a number of sources: through revelations made by the spirit concerned; by serving as apprentices to other established mediums, and also through personal improvisation and innovation. When possessed, each was assisted by an individual known as a *sapati*; these were generally family members or friends familiar with their practices. These spirit mediums were neither organized into a tightly knit cooperative nor bound together by common aims: in fact, they seldom came together, apart from at the initiation ceremonies of new spirit hosts and funerals of deceased mediums; it was usually only during such occasions that all the northern spirits surfaced simultaneously and were bound by unity of purpose. Despite being in competition with each other for clients and recognition, the mediums nevertheless had a number of common features. The spirits they hosted were either from the Akan forest belt or from the northern savanna. They were all born in Teshi, and all but one of them were of Ga extraction. They played on the Ga perception – shared by coastal peoples in general – that ritual knowledge obtained from the north (via Ashanti) was particularly potent. The appeal and mystery of these northern spirits were crucial to marketing their ritual services. The shrines of these spirit mediums resembled collections best described as 'northern ethnographica' (Wendl 1999: 116) and memorabilia: religious kitsch believed to have ritual potency and collected from either the northern savanna or Akan forest belt during their travels. Islam, the most obvious marker of northernness in the Ghanaian popular imagination, was used by these mediums to inform their appearance and activities: many of them dressed like the Islamized peoples of the north, and their shrines included idols in northern garb, amulets and charms, *goro*/kola nuts, and features such as Arabic inscriptions.

In addition to their common role as cultural brokers between the north and south, another factor united these spirit mediums: they all appeared to be in sympathy with the National Democratic Congress (NDC), the party that sat in opposition to the ruling National Patriotic Party (NPP) in 2003. They often canvassed openly for the party at rallies and frequented the local NDC office to discuss issues of interest with party representatives. They encouraged clients over whom they exercised influence to support the NDC, discussing local and national issues at length after spiritual consultations. Most of these discussions were informal and friendly, but were always conducted when the mediums were not

<sup>17</sup>Hausa, Fulani: ethnic groups spread across several West African countries.



FIGURE 3 Tigare during a possession performance in Teshi

possessed. In order to contextualize the political inclination of this specific group of people, a brief history of Ghanaian politics is warranted.

### ETHNICITY AND NATIONAL POLITICS

It has been argued that since independence in 1957 two well-defined political traditions – though embodied by different parties during different periods – have dominated Ghanaian politics. In recent times, two parties – the NDC, whose symbol is the Umbrella, and the NPP, symbolized by an Elephant – are regarded as the respective standard bearers of these traditions, and have, between them, secured about 95 per cent of the popular vote in elections since 1992 (Nugent 1999; 2001; Morrison 2004). The NDC is generally associated with a populist, centre-left agenda, while the NPP is regarded as a liberal, centre-right party. In addition, the two parties are popularly perceived to be channels for articulating ethnic interests, with the NDC commanding much support from coastal peoples such as the Ewe, Fanti, and peoples north of Ashanti, while the NPP's main power base is recognized as the modern Ashanti Region. The political fault line between the two traditions can be traced back to the last years of the colonial period, while the perception of a corresponding ethnic fault line developed gradually, but gained strength after the appearance of J. J. Rawlings on the political scene in 1979.

The United Gold Coast Convention (UGCC) was founded in the tense post-war years to push for local control of government in the shortest possible time, but in 1949 Kwame Nkrumah and associates, in response to acute ideological

differences with the leadership, inaugurated the Convention People's Party (CPP). The political fault line was now established: the 'Verandah Boys' – consisting of workers, servicemen, labourers and school leavers – formed the core of the CPP, while the UGCC was manned by affluent professionals, mainly lawyers such as J. B. Danquah – one of its main driving forces – and businessmen. The primary factor behind the CPP–UGCC enmity was related to issues of social class, and initially support for both parties came from both Ashanti and the Gold Coast Colony, suggesting that ethnicity was yet to complicate the relationship between social class and political sympathies.

The Gold Coast metamorphosed into Ghana in 1957 under Nkrumah, who eventually declared a one-party state, alienated the military, and was overthrown by a coup in 1966. The National Liberation Council (NLC) governed Ghana until 1969, reversing many of Nkrumah's policies. The Progress Party – seen as influenced by J. B. Danquah's legacy – continued the NLC's policy of liberalization under K. A. Busia until he was displaced by sections of the military under Colonel I. K. Acheampong on 13 January 1972. The Acheampong years were seen as an Akan-dominated era, when cronyism and ethnic clientelism were rife. This regime ushered in what has been described as a period of accelerated decline until 1979, when another coup took place led by Flight Lieutenant J. J. Rawlings, an Anlo-Ewe from the Volta Region. Power was handed over to Limann's People's National Party (PNP) – formed from the remnants of the CPP – but continued corruption resulted in another coup by Rawlings in 1981, known as his 'Second Coming'. Rawlings eventually came to identify with Nkrumah's socialist experiments,<sup>18</sup> seeing himself in opposition to the Danquah-Busia legacy, which had come to be associated with recent regimes and the inland Akan regions, in particular Ashanti. The Provisional National Defence Council (PNDC) ruled until 1992 when it metamorphosed into the NDC on the eve of Ghana's return to multi-party elections. By this time a certain degree of ethnic polarization had become a visible reality, with many now voting on a regional rather than a purely party basis. Rawlings's staunchest supporters were dubbed the 'Dzelukope mafia' (referring to the Anlo-Ewe town he and his aides called home) and the 'Fanti Confederacy' (a nineteenth-century alliance of Fanti states antagonistic to Asante, though here referring to influential Fanti individuals within the NDC), giving his support base a strong coastal underpinning. In 1998, Rawlings chose a Fanti ally, Professor J. E. Atta-Mills, as his presidential successor to contest the 2000 election, but his candidate lost to J. A. Kufuor, an Ashanti, of the NPP – a party seen as a continuation of the inland Danquah-Busia political tradition. Accepting the existence of an inland–coastal divide influencing political choice might suggest that the Ga would identify with the Nkrumah/NDC tradition. However, a number of high-profile Ga figures have endorsed the Danquah-Busia tradition in the past, among them Ankrah, the head of the NLC, and Nii Amaa Ollennu, acting president of the Second Republic – albeit very briefly – in 1970. In both these cases, political sympathies were based on membership of a particular social class rather than ethnic allegiances. Not surprisingly, therefore, Teshi's

<sup>18</sup>The NDC cannot be read simply as the continuation of the CPP tradition, although Rawlings, despite being critical, would align himself with Nkrumah whenever it suited him.

electoral history and the political allegiances of its residents remain quite complicated, with the electorate often making unexpected choices.

Teshi's borders coincide with the parliamentary constituency of Ledzokuku, where during the elections of 1992 and 1996 the NDC enjoyed widespread support: an appeal partly explained by the profile of voters in the area. The majority of Teshi's population – including the spirit mediums – consists of people engaged in poorly paid occupations: a section of society once supportive of the Rawlings 'revolution'. The structural adjustment programme that he implemented under the auspices of the World Bank in the mid-1980s resulted, among other things, in a burst of petty capitalism and retailing, favouring this section of society (Jeffries 1992). The NDC manifestos of 1992 and 1996 appealed to this electorate by pledging to create a more equal society, mass employment and self-sufficiency, and the NDC's Nii Adjei-Boye Sekan – a Ga from Accra and a former close aide of Rawlings – was twice elected. However, in the build-up to the 2000 election, a number of events proved detrimental to the NDC: the political landscape had changed, and the memory of the Revolution was a distant one for many, in particular the younger generation. Rawlings had vowed to stamp out corruption; a promise that many considered was unfulfilled during the NDC years. A string of unsolved murders in Accra between 1998 and 2000 – thirty women dead – terrified the people: rumour had it the killings were sacrifices to bloodthirsty spirits, carried out by NDC activists on the instruction of ritual specialists to ensure victory in the impending elections.<sup>19</sup> Such factors fed a perception that the NDC was reigning over and directly responsible for a state of moral decay. In addition, Teshi had come to be referred to as a 'No-Hopeland' where people had little faith in the future. Not surprisingly, the NPP's slogan of 'Positive Change' (Nugent 2001: 405) proved to be an attractive one for many, and Eddie Akita (NPP) won the parliamentary election comfortably. In a run-off to the presidential elections held shortly afterwards, Kufuor polled 61.7 per cent in Ledzokuku, while the corresponding figure for the rest of the country was 57.4 per cent.<sup>20</sup> The NPP win in Ledzokuku was the result of a tireless campaign by party activists, who had exploited the atmosphere of discontent. On account of its ethnic and social make-up, however, Ledzokuku remained a swing seat where playing the ethnic card and evoking an elitist-populist dichotomy could result in gaining votes: this meant that Teshi was and is a key battleground for the parties.

#### THE NATIONAL IN THE LOCAL: THE POLITICS OF ETHNICITY IN TESHI

The euphoria following the NPP's historic win was short-lived in Teshi as problems related to the provision of local resources – in particular acute water shortages – surfaced immediately. Access to clean water had been an issue since 1999 when, towards the end of that year, pipelines serving Lascala, Aduem and Teshi Village ceased to function. Deteriorating public sanitation now added to the

<sup>19</sup> <<http://allafrica.com/stories/200012200115.html>>, accessed 10 December 2008.

<sup>20</sup> <<http://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/election2000/runoff.detail.php3>>, accessed 2 July 2008.

problem: two main public lavatories could only be cleaned once a week. Soon after the 2000 election, the Teshi Residents Association (TRA) – a pressure group of mixed ethnic and social composition – approached local NPP representatives with a number of complaints. This meeting yielded virtually nothing. The infrastructure problems associated with the pipelines proved, allegedly, too difficult for a quick fix. Residents found themselves not only queuing for water at stipulated hours, usually in the morning and at dusk, but also paying for it. A single bucket of water cost between ₵1000 and ₵2000 in September 2003: the average household consumed at least six buckets of water a day. The atmosphere during these distribution hours was tense and unpleasant; there was a growing sense among many that the government had betrayed them. Local NDC activists had been observing the situation with interest, and now, fifteen months from the 2004 election, saw this situation as an opportunity to launch an anti-NPP campaign in Teshi.

Both the NDC and NPP had youth wings in Teshi controlled by neighbourhood party officials. Aged between seventeen and thirty,<sup>21</sup> these people were united by their socio-economic circumstances, and were either unemployed or felt under-employed, despite their possession of school certificates or qualifications (Higher National Certificate or Higher National Diploma) from Ghana's polytechnics. Many were engaged in petty retail, while others volunteered their services to their families, and others waited in anticipation of better prospects. Both parties were able to take advantage of such individuals, paying them small sums of money for tasks such as distributing leaflets and canvassing. Members of the NDC's youth wing were now instructed to conduct door-to-door visits, in order to convince people of the inability of the NPP to resolve the water crisis. In the past, the NDC had presented itself as an anti-elitist party, emphasizing the rift between those who had no access to water and those in the prosperous estates who did, and promising to attend to the needs of the former. The failure of either party to do so, however, saw some members of the NDC youth wing abandoning the anti-elitist stance in favour of playing the ethnic card at the local level.<sup>22</sup> Activists began arguing that the NPP was only interested in developing the Ashanti Region (citing the overwhelmingly Ashanti composition of Kufuor's cabinet and government) and cared little for the Ga (and coastal ethnic groups). Kufuor's privileged Ashanti origins were evoked as the main reason for his indifference towards the Ga, while his deputy Alhaji Mahama (a northerner) was also demonized; it was suggested (incorrectly) that under Mahama's influence developmental aid had been pouring into the (ethnically favoured) Northern Region. The picture painted by the NDC, which portrayed the NPP as an overwhelmingly Ashanti and northern party, was somewhat unfair: the local MP for Ledzokuku, Eddie Akita of the NPP, was a Ga, while Atta-Mills of the NDC had appointed Martin Amidu, from the Upper Eastern Region, and Alhaju Mumuni, from the Northern Region, as his running mates in 2000 and 2004 respectively. Contrary to the perception in Teshi, the three northern regions

<sup>21</sup>It is argued that 'youth' should be conceptualized as a socio-political category which places a section of society in opposition to 'elders' and 'chiefs' (Lentz 1999).

<sup>22</sup>Ghanaian politicians are reluctant to play the ethnic card on the national level (Nugent 1999: 427).



were actually NDC strongholds. In contemporary Ghana, these regions remain distrustful of possible Ashanti domination and resentful of past Asante hegemony, and tend to view the NPP as an Ashanti-friendly party. The developing ethnic discourse in Teshi did not consider these realities, but clumped the Ashanti and the peoples of the north together, representing them as the beneficiaries of NPP rule. The perceived ritual map, which apparently separated coastal peoples from the Akan forest belt and the northern savanna, was one factor in this distortion of the modern political map.

Emphasis on ethnic differences at this time caused tensions to rise between the Ga, Ewe<sup>23</sup> and coastal peoples, on the one hand, and the Ashanti and northerners on the other. Resentment on the part of the Ga and Ewe residents gradually became palpable and reached its zenith in October 2003, affecting the composition of the youth wings. Prior to 2003, both NDC and NPP youth wings were of mixed ethnic composition. After October, however, these youth wings reconfigured themselves, splitting along ethnic lines. Ga, Ewe and Fanti men and women who had supported the NPP deserted the party in favour of the NDC, while northerners and people of Ashanti extraction left the NDC to join the NPP. These differences had little to do with political ideology, but gradually came to revolve around ethnicity and, to a lesser extent, personal grievances. Members of the rival youth wings often met at funerals held during the weekends. At best they ignored people associated with the rival political party; at worst, they were openly hostile to each other. An increasingly complex situation was developing. In particular, the NDC youth wing had been supported by spirit mediums such as Afram, Anaa and Mossi,<sup>24</sup> who argued that Ghana owed its limited prosperity to the Rawlings regime and that equality was only possible under the NDC. However, since ethnicity was turning into a predominant theme, the spirit mediums were now in an uncomfortable position. Some of them had strong family ties to the unruly young men responsible for engineering the ethnic hostilities – Afram's grandson and Mossi's brother were key members of the NDC youth wing. The ritual activities of these spirit mediums made a conceptual distinction between their Ga-ness, and the exotic appeal of all things northern and Ashanti associated with their spirits. All of them attracted numerous Ashanti and northern clients from the nearby *zongo*; they risked losing business if they were seen to endorse the anti-Ashanti and anti-northern propaganda of members of the NDC youth wing. Ethnic tensions had created two (negatively) antagonistic spheres in Teshi that apparently coincided with the differences the spirit mediums exploited (positively) to sell their resources. The mediums thus found the animosities between the Ga and coastal peoples, on one hand, and the Ashanti and the northerners, on the other, deeply unsettling.

<sup>23</sup> The differences between the Ewe, Ga and Fanti were played down, and the NDC cast as a regime supportive of these people, while being fair to others.

<sup>24</sup> There is a danger of reading too much into the NDC activists counting on the support of 'fetish priests'. According to some ideologues of the revolution, Christianity – particularly Pentecostalism – had demonized 'traditional religion', resulting in a sense of shame (Gyanfosu 2002). The regime was sympathetic to traditional religion and its promotion by revivalist organizations such as the Afrikania Mission, a development which they believed could restore a positive national image (Gifford 1998; Gyanfosu 2002). However, in the Teshie case, the links between the NDC youths and the priests resulted mainly from kinship and residence patterns.



## MEDIATING SPIRITS: KEEPING THE PEACE

The beginning of 2004 found the spirit mediums busy. As standards of living deteriorated against a backdrop of growing ethnic hostilities in the locality, a larger number of people than usual turned to the spirit world for answers. Many requested that the spirits find remedies to personal problems brought on by financial difficulties and the water crisis. But the contradiction was not immediately apparent: residents were flocking to Ga and Ewe spirit mediums – and the northern spirits they hosted – to vent hostile sentiments over problems supposedly caused by a government perceived to be dominated by the Ashanti and savanna peoples. As the year progressed, the spirit mediums continued to canvass for the NDC, though they were increasingly uncomfortable with proliferating ethnic tensions. They sought to distance themselves from the anti-Ashanti and anti-northern discourses of the youth wing of the NDC, albeit without much success. Events at the national level now exacerbated the situation, and saw the mediums employ their spirits in a new role, which helped them address concerns about these tensions in the ritual sphere.

The Kufuor government had established a National Reconciliation Commission (NRC) in order to investigate human rights abuses that allegedly had taken place soon after the ‘Second Coming’.<sup>25</sup> The majority of these alleged abuses were related to confiscation of property, beatings and executions, in which Rawlings and some of his closest advisers – like his security coordinator, Kodjo Tsikata – were implicated. NDC loyalists in Teshi and all over the country were appalled at the idea of the NRC, seeing it as a means of demonizing former revolutionaries who were now the NPP’s electoral rivals. On 12 February 2004 the NRC summoned Rawlings to shed light on his involvement in a well-known incident – the disappearance and murder of three high court judges and a retired soldier in 1982.<sup>26</sup> Proceedings were broadcast on national television and a cross-section from Teshi Village gathered in a local bar – a popular venue for communal events such as weddings and funerals – equipped with a sizeable television screen. Those present included senior NDC and NPP activists, members of the youth wing, the spirit mediums and myself. The younger members of the audience – many associated with the youth wing of the NDC – had no memory of the Revolution, and on previous occasions Afram, Mossi, Tigare and Anaa had all spoken in favour of Rawlings, explaining to people – especially the younger members of the party – why he was the only politician capable, at the time, of delivering Ghana from a vicious circle of injustice, poverty and corruption. Rawlings was watched with rapt attention, with over a hundred people now gathered into and around the bar: translation (from the English used in the NRC proceedings) was supplied by the younger members of the NDC present, mainly for the benefit of the spirit mediums and older NDC sympathizers. But after he had been questioned for about thirty minutes the overall result seemed inconclusive, and Rawlings appeared to have triumphed

<sup>25</sup>The inspiration came from South Africa, and was meant to give victims opportunities to tell their stories.

<sup>26</sup>This event caused outrage: Amartey Kwei, the supposed orchestrator, was executed. Allegations suggest that Kwei may have been acting under Tsikata’s orders.

over a potentially difficult situation. NPP loyalists were furious at the outcome, believing that Rawlings had been let off lightly, and a chorus of disbelief arose from them. This mood was taken up by the junior members present, who now began hurling sharp insults at their NDC counterparts. The inevitable retaliation led to a noisy escalation: emotions were now running high.

The television event and its dramatic emotional aftermath went on to trigger violent clashes when NDC loyalists vandalized a structure which served as an NPP office. As the day progressed, instigated by the youth wing, NDC supporters (mainly Ga and Ewe men) were engaged in skirmishes with NPP members (who were from Ashanti or the north) on the streets of Teshi Village. The tense atmosphere, developing over the past six months, had climaxed finally in this violent confrontation. The spirit mediums now intervened in an unlikely manner. In the immediate vicinity of the bar, a spontaneous and loud performance suddenly assumed centre-stage, diverting attention from the rival ethno-political gangs: Afram, Mossi, and Anaa had been 'mounted' by their spirits without warning. Others suddenly joined them: Tigare, Hausa, Fulani, Tomoga, and Alla, who were also present. These spirits emerged in their usual form, with the mediums, assisted by their apprentices, now changing into northern attire to signify they had been mounted. They began chanting in Twi and a number of northern languages. The spirits talked to a stunned audience of NDC members, narrating the evils that had taken place under Rawlings instead of praising the regime, as the spirit mediums had done earlier and on previous occasions. The northern spirits had emerged in support of the NPP, the political tradition associated with the Ashanti. This impromptu performance began to address the ills of the Revolution. Afram, the Akan spirit, led the anti-Rawlings assault. The spirits began explaining to their young audience in Twi how scared people had been of his soldiers, and how problematic life was in the first few years following the 'Second Coming'. Afram began imitating a hot-headed, burly soldier, while Mossi and Tomoga assumed the roles of market women. The soldier proceeded to talk to the market women in an intimidating fashion, while the other spirits – Anaa, Tigare, Alla and Fulani – metamorphosed into onlookers who were too frightened to intervene. Afram began to imitate the former president in a mocking fashion, gesturing that Rawlings had stolen from the nation, by literally taking money out of onlookers' pockets. The spirits proceeded to complain about how the NDC regime favoured Ewe and coastal people in the past: the fact that people in the Volta Region now had electricity – which they lacked before the revolution – appeared to prove this point. Tigare began critiquing the role Kojo Tsikata had played during the Rawlings regime. Other issues were dealt with, in particular how so many (mainly Ashanti) people had fled Ghana during this Ewe-dominated period. Mossi, Tigare and Hausa began singing about the problems of people in the Northern Region after years of the NDC regime: chronic poverty, unemployment and the lack of food security. The spirits spoke, at times, in a mixture of northern languages interspersed with Ga, while at others they spoke exclusively in Twi and randomly in various northern languages. During the latter instances, Ashanti and northern NPP members translated the proceedings for the benefit of the (pro-NDC) Ga and Ewe members of the audience. This performance – and narrative constructed by the spirits – was unlike any other possession spectacle in the past, as these spirit mediums seldom became possessed simultaneously. The Akan and northern spirits had emerged at

the perfect time, preventing what had the potential to develop into an episode of sustained violence between people divided along ethnic and party lines. By entering the political discourse at this opportune moment they reminded younger NDC supporters (who had constructed a romanticized vision of the Rawlings era) about the difficulties of daily life during the regime.

Similar possession performances were re-enacted time and again that year, during disputes which had the potential to lead to clashes between NDC and NPP supporters. Many of my informants gave accounts of various incidents, but I witnessed several worthy of mention. One involved a young Ga man, Jacob Adjei, a relative of Afram. As a key ideologue of the NDC youth wing, he often clashed with NPP counterparts. In April 2004, during a public argument concerning the lack of efforts at improving sanitation, Jacob assaulted Francis Kwame, an Ashanti NPP activist. Onlookers intervened, which led to more violence, and Francis was surrounded by angry NDC supporters. Mossi had witnessed this argument from a client's house nearby, and came to his rescue. She was mounted, as were Tomoga, Afram, Fulani, Tigare and Hausa, who were in the neighbourhood by custom, and who arrived on the scene alerted by her cries. The mounted spirits threw themselves into the NDC mob, allowing Francis to escape. After a similar anti-NDC performance, which depicted the key figures of the regime (each spirit playing the same roles as they had on 12 February), the spirit Mossi approached Jacob angrily – speaking in a mixture of Twi and Ga for his benefit – demanding compensation for being ‘insulted’. The spirit Mossi instructed Jacob to buy the spirit several bottles of Guinness, and four packets of cigarettes, in addition to *goro/kola* nuts. The other spirits began talking to NDC supporters, explaining to them that assaults on people of Ashanti or northern extraction were unwarranted and would be punished severely in future. Before they left their hosts, the spirits collectively demanded items from Jacob's NDC associates: *akpeteshi* (the local gin), Schnapps and several bottles of beer. These were consumed by the spirits at a frantic pace before an alarmed audience. The spirits informed the audience that any subsequent ethnic outbursts would warrant more expensive items, possibly the sacrifice of a ram. This pacification attempt threatened the resources of these NDC youth members, as most of them were unemployed or low earners. Over the next two months, I witnessed similar if low-key occurrences where the spirits came to possess the mediums when NDC members presented party politics in terms of ethnicity, or when young people associated with the NDC appeared to be on the brink of confrontations with NPP members. I am told that such performances were often repeated until the 2004 December elections; members of the audience were stunned into submission. Many members of the NDC youth wing responsible for orchestrating these skirmishes had close family ties with the spirit mediums to whom they deferred: similarly some key members of the NPP's youth wing frequented the mediums for advice, and also held them in high esteem. Masterfully timed, the mediums brought to possession ‘the skill of phronesis’ – ‘of knowing how to make significant and timely interventions’ (Lambek 2002: 37). After such episodes, the spirit mediums always claimed that they had no memory of the incident, in tune with their usual possession practice, and their audiences (who belonged to both NDC and NPP camps) were summoned to explain what had occurred. During these discussions, the mediums reiterated in mild, but no uncertain terms, their support for the NDC regime, claiming that they were not aware of their

spirits' wishes, but needed the latter to be respected. By this 'disavowal of agency' (Lambek 2002: 37) over what occurred during possession, and by contradicting their spirits when out of trance, the spirit mediums were, indirectly and subtly, both acknowledging and reinforcing the authority of their spirits. There was a certain degree of soul searching and dialogue between members of both political camps during these post-performance discussions as to why ethnic tensions had arisen in the first place. These novel possession performances generated such interest and speculation that even Teshi Village's population of committed Christians – always critical of such practices as a reminder of a non-progressive past – were drawn into the public discussions. A new atmosphere had emerged as a direct result of these performances, which forced members of rival camps to interact with each other: the spirits and the mediums moved the situation from conflict to cooperation.

On the eve of the 2004 elections, the Teshi Residents Association (TRA) embarked on a new campaign: its spokesperson began urging people, irrespective of their political affinities, to participate in a 'No Show' campaign on polling day 2004, mainly in protest at the unresolved water situation.<sup>27</sup> A large number of both NDC and NPP activists – including the youth responsible for fuelling ethnic tensions – supported the move, and decided to cooperate with the TRA. This was an extraordinary turn of events, given the developments of the preceding year, and the antagonism often shown between members of both parties at street level. Ethnicity faded as a mobilizing issue in the penultimate stage of the 2004 election, and people who had been hostile towards each other now began cooperating in order to put pressure on local government representatives. Voter turn-out in Ledzokuku was low, but the NPP's parliamentary candidate, Gladys Nortey Ashitey, secured 43.1 per cent of this vote against 42 per cent for the NDC's Nii Nortey Dua,<sup>28</sup> and despite a recount<sup>29</sup> was duly elected. The NDC and NPP had acquired almost the same share of the vote. The results could be interpreted in terms of several factors, but one of them was that the stresses that had been tearing the community apart on ethnic lines had gradually been patched up: the other may be that the efforts of the mediums and spirits were successful in preventing inter-ethnic conflict through encouraging dialogue between hostile camps and focusing attention on the TRA. I returned to Teshi in August 2005 after a year's absence to hear that the performances had become a less frequent occurrence as 2004 progressed, and eventually disappeared after the elections. The project of the spirit mediums and their spirits – which involved achieving harmony between rival ethno-political groups, between the north and the south, (and metaphorically) between the Umbrella and the Elephant, seemed to have been completed successfully.

<sup>27</sup> < <http://www.modernghana.com/news/44814/1/no-water-no-vote-8211-teshie-residents.html> >, accessed 10 December 2009.

<sup>28</sup> < <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/ghana/03610.pdf> >, accessed 2 July 2008.

<sup>29</sup> < <http://www.modernghana.com/news/2/116144/1/ledzokuku-ndc-candidate-petitions-court.html> >, accessed 28 June 2008.

## CONCLUSION

It is not surprising that this new, corrective discourse on recent political history emerged in the ritual sphere as a product of the proliferating ethnic hostilities of 2003. New spirits often appear during periods of crisis, being a response to, and product of, a state of anomie, or profound social, cultural and moral confusion: Behrend (1999) documents how new Christian spirits critical of sorcery, witchcraft, and deteriorating moral standards surfaced in northern Uganda during an era of inter-ethnic strife and civil war. Sharp (1990) studies the rise of a new category of spirit in Madagascar, the Njarininty, which emerged in the 1980s to possess young women of school-going age who faced profound social and academic difficulties in their daily lives. These performances in Teshi, however, were not associated with the emergence of new spirits, but rather saw old spirits take on completely different roles. Unlike the cases documented in Behrend (1999) or Lambek (2002), these spirits – Afram, Mossi and the others – are not historical personalities, but mythical ones. These spirits were engaged in satirical commentaries on the political condition and current politicians, exploiting the prevailing ethnic tensions to their advantage. It has been observed that possession is a creative polysemic practice (Masquelier 2001: 124–5) that reconfigures itself. The case of northern spirits on the Ga coastal littoral suggests that spirits are innovative, capable of taking on a multiplicity of roles – not usually associated with them – as they ‘mirror the full range of possibilities inherent in the particular slice of life over which they preside’ (Brown 1991: 6).

Spirit mediumship, according to Lambek (2002: 37), often presents the medium with a powerful vehicle that can raise contemporary concerns and critique social and moral conditions.<sup>30</sup> Possession is also about a renunciation of agency as well as a redistribution of the same. Spirits and spirit mediums in Teshi maintained a critical dialogue with each other in the following sense: through renouncing their agency – as NDC supporters – in the political sphere, the mediums had redistributed the same to their spirits, who were able to speak with more authoritative voices in favour of the rival NPP, thereby preserving the dynamics of the local history of politics and inter-ethnic contact. The dynamics of this history are usually more powerful than individuals, no matter how influential they may be: the spirit mediums would have been unable to critique the ideology of NDC activists without the help of their spirits. The mediums were able to move from experiencing history – as mere players who took on board the ideology of the NDC camp – to actually changing the very course of local political history, by averting further ethnic tensions. Possession allowed these spirit mediums to change from ‘constructing’ themselves – from being mere players in a particular embedded history of ethnic contact – to actively making that history, as they exhibited ‘consciousness of the historical process and contentious intervention in that process’ (Lambek 2002: 33).

*Postscript:* In 2008, the NDC won the parliamentary and presidential elections in Ghana. Ledzokuku’s new MP is the NDC’s Nii Nortey Dua, who won

<sup>30</sup> Lambek provides us with the example of a spirit medium, Nuriaty, in Mayotte, possessed by the spirit of a former Sultan. Both spirit medium and spirit are in agreement on the problematic nature of the present, with similar views on how to change it (Lambek 2002).

57.23 per cent of the popular vote, while 55.80 per cent of the electorate voted for the NDC's presidential candidate, Atta-Mills.<sup>31</sup> The reins of power swung peacefully from one tradition to the other without any overt recourse to the stirring of ethnic feeling in the area. Whether the northern spirits will see fit to intervene once again in such a dramatic fashion at some point in the future to ensure historical continuity, however, remains to be seen.

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<sup>31</sup>'Ghana Elections 2008', <<http://blogs.myjoyonline.com/elections/2008/constituency/127/>>, accessed 15 January 2009.

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## ABSTRACT

This article focuses on a number of Ga spirit mediums located in Teshi, a neighbourhood of the Ghanaian capital, Accra. These individuals host foreign spirits from areas north of Ga territory, such as the modern Ashanti, Gonja and



Dagomba regions. Such encounters of cross-cultural spirit possession have often been analysed in the scholarly literature as an embedded history of contact between peoples. These histories of ethnic or cultural contact – which inform cross-cultural spirit possession – are constantly re-imagined by spirit mediums and the broader community they service. How this re-imagination occurs, in conjunction with developments in the contemporary political and public spheres, is a theme that remains understudied. The perceived shifts in the contours of ethnic alliances and rivalries on a national scale, against the backdrop of modern Ghanaian party politics and the ever-changing relationships between the Ga and their northern neighbours, led to a thematic reconfiguration of possession practices in 2004. This ethnographic vignette details how spirit mediums were able to apply the ethnic and conceptual cultural divisions intrinsic to this corpus of ritual practice to a critique of national political events, producing a commentary, through possession, on the changing discourses on ethnicity and ethnic relations in the Ghanaian state.

#### RÉSUMÉ

Cet article s'intéresse à des médiums ga de Teshi, une banlieue de la capitale ghanéenne, Accra. Ces personnes reçoivent des esprits étrangers du nord du territoire ga, notamment des régions modernes Ashanti, Gonja et Dagomba. Ces cas de possession d'esprit interculturelle ont souvent été analysés dans la littérature savante comme une histoire enracinée de contact entre des peuples. Ces histoires de contact ethnique ou culturel (qui éclairent la possession d'esprit interculturelle) sont constamment réimaginées par les médiums et par la communauté qu'ils desservent. La façon dont cette réimagination survient, en conjonction avec l'évolution intervenue dans les sphères politique et publique contemporaines, est un thème qui reste négligé dans les études. Les changements perçus de contours d'alliances et de rivalités ethniques à l'échelle nationale, dans le contexte de la politique moderne des partis ghanéens et des relations en constante évolution entre les Ga et leurs voisins du Nord, ont conduit à une reconfiguration thématique des pratiques de possession en 2004. Ce croquis ethnographique décrit la manière dont les médiums ont su appliquer les divisions culturelles ethniques et conceptuelles intrinsèques à ce corpus de pratique rituelle à une critique d'événements politiques nationaux, en produisant un commentaire, à travers la possession, sur les discours changeants sur l'ethnicité et les relations ethniques au Ghana.